

# Press Freedom and the Conscription Story

Wonder World · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

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In 1968 my father was sentenced to twenty-eight days in a military detention barracks for refusing to answer questions at an army medical examination. He was a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War. He was twenty-two. He had been a newspaper reporter for six years, most recently at *The Sun* in Sydney. When the case went through the courts and the press it became one of the most widely covered conscientious objector cases in Australian legal history.

The reason it matters to a site about journalism is not the politics. It is the journalism. My father was both the subject of the story and a journalist. The coverage shaped the law. The law shaped what Australian journalists could do next. And the experience of being on the other side of the microphone, with reporters shouting questions at him from the steps of a courthouse, changed how my father talked about press freedom for the rest of his life.

## The case in brief

Simon Townsend was called up under the National Service Act in 1968. He registered his objection as a non-religious conscientious objector, a category the law did not easily accommodate at the time. When he refused to cooperate with the medical examination he was arrested, charged, and sentenced. He served the sentence at the Holsworthy Military Detention Barracks in Sydney's south-west.

His case, along with others such as William White's and John Zarb's, helped force a public debate about who the conscription laws were catching, and who they were missing. It also forced the High Court and the Commonwealth's prosecutors to confront the question of conscientious objection on non-religious grounds, a category that had existed in UK law for decades but which Australian law had been slow to formalise.

## What the press did

The coverage was extensive. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, the ABC and the commercial TV networks covered the sentencing and the release. Photographers waited outside the Burwood courthouse. My father was photographed being led into custody and being released. The family still has the clippings. Some of them are reproduced on this site.

What the press did not do, and what my father remained quietly angry about for decades, was investigate the full story of what happened inside Holsworthy. The beatings. The forced head-shaving. The collusion between senior prison officers and the military police. He gave evidence about it years later in the 1991 HREOC inquiry. It was not a story the press of 1968 chose to pursue.

## Why it reshaped the law

Within a few years of Simon's case the law around conscientious objection in Australia was amended to recognise non-religious objection. The combination of court cases and public coverage made the existing framework untenable. Journalism did not win the argument on its own. But journalism put the cases in front of the public in a way that the parliament could not ignore.

That is a fact worth teaching in any journalism course. The press cannot change the law. But the press can refuse to let the law operate out of sight. The combination of a consistent reporter, an engaged editor, and a public hearing is what reshapes legislation.

## Why press freedom matters to the craft

Simon would not have made a career out of journalism if he had not experienced, at twenty-two, what it means to be on the other side of a reporter's notebook. He knew how a careless sentence could damage a source's life. He knew what it felt like to read a report of yourself in a paper and not recognise any of it. He also knew what it felt like when a reporter got it right.

Those lessons ran through everything he wrote afterwards about the craft. Check your facts. Check the spelling of the name. Do not make things up. Do not let anyone else make things up and pretend you did not know. Those rules are not invented. They are what press freedom needs to survive.

## Where to read more

Court records for *Townsend v The Crown* are held at the National Archives of Australia. The [National Film and Sound Archive](#) holds news footage of the 1968 release. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian* and *The Sun* coverage is accessible through [Trove](#), the National Library's digital archive.

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